



VERACRUZ, MEXICO “River of Raptors” - Oct 2-12, 2014

Trip Report and photos by Robert Straub

Day 1 / Oct 2: Playa Chalchihuecan; Cardel; Chichicaxtle; Rio Escondido

Gorgeous weather and a steady show of raptors highlighted our first day in Veracruz, on our annual River of Raptors tour in Mexico. We started early with delicious breakfast buffet and coffee, then headed towards the rising sun at Playa Chalchihuecan.



Amid coastal scrub and sand beach habitat, we admired resident birds such as the local race of Rufous-naped Wren (*left*), along with an amazing show of kestrels and accipiters, providing good study of Cooper's versus Sharp-shinned Hawks. A local Roadside Hawk and Great Black Hawk were quite confiding.

Our lunch in Cardel was perfectly timed to see close to 30,000 Broad-winged Hawks in the noon hour, all streaming over the roof of the hotel. We picked out a Zone-tailed Hawk and watched the resident Peregrine Falcon harassing pigeons over the town.



After a short, fairly slow visit to the inland hawk watching location at Chichicaxtle, we spent most of the late afternoon birding in Rio Escondido, enjoying stellar looks at a Squirrel Cuckoo, Canivet's Emerald (*right*), Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and other species.

Day 2 / Oct 3: La Mancha; Rio La Antigua



Our early start today allowed us to witness a lovely sunrise over the coast at La Mancha. The first rays of light silhouetted flights of passerines and other migrants rising out of their overnight roosts in search of food. Flocks of Dickcissels flew overhead, as other local birds appeared, including a pair of Common Black Hawks, Lineated Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, and many others. Walking inland along tree-lined tracks we found a pair of Rose-throated Becards, and a Black-headed Trogon. We were captivated by a fantastic show of migrating dragonflies and butterflies throughout the morning.

We returned to Cardel for lunch and some rooftop hawk watching. The flight was a little slow so we left early for our afternoon visit to La Antigua, only 10 minutes away.

Situated on the La Antigua River, this small town of the same name dates from 1523, when spanish explorer Hernan Cortes established it as his home base to launch his bold conquest of what is now known as Mexico. We visited the famed 16th-century church and the remains of Cortes' home, now covered in giant fig trees, before heading towards the river and a splendid boat ride.

We motored slowly down the river, watching all the while for kingfishers, herons, egrets and Neotropical Cormorants (*right*), some still in breeding plumage. At the mouth of the river, hundreds of Brown Pelican and terns - mostly Gull-billed - were resting, along with multitudes of shorebirds, including Long-billed Curlew, Marbled Godwit, and a lovely Western Sandpiper.



We anchored on a sandy shoreline and disembarked to walk the beach a bit, observing scores of resting Black-bellied Plovers and a pair of striking Collared Plovers (*left*). On our way back to the dock, we passed the local waders again - ones with wings, and some with fishing poles - all benefiting from the river's bounty. An excellent seafood dinner at the dockside *Las Delicias* restaurant rounded out a wonderful day.

Day 3 / Oct 4: Playa Juan Angel; Cardel; Chichicaxtle; Xalapa - University Gardens



This morning we explored Johnny Angel Beach (Playa Juan Angel), a popular birding site with spectacular coastal dunes, thorn-scrub forest, and a small productive estuary at the river's mouth. The diverse habitats host a variety of avian species to occupy us. We found animated Rufous-naped "Veracruz" Wrens, along with kingbirds, flycatchers and orioles.



We enjoyed excellent looks at a pair of Mexican Sheartails (*above*) in particular a male flashing its amazingly long forked tail; these Mexican endemic hummingbirds are found only in central Veracruz and the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula.



At the river's mouth, a fish run attracted numerous Brown Pelicans, 5 white-phase Reddish Egrets, and several local fishermen and women casting their nets. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs (*above*) foraged side by side, providing good comparison views.

Back in Cardel we fell into our routine of lunch in the restaurant followed by hawk-watching on the roof. After ogling a few thousand migrating raptors (a bit slow by local standards!), we headed to the Chichicaxtle hawkwatch site (*below*) to check out their flight numbers. We were not disappointed. In a little more than an hour we had over 20,000 birds, mostly Broad-winged Hawks, with a few early Swainson's Hawks, and nice looks at two migrating Hook-billed Kites. We shared this great show with biologists from the Institute of Ecology, on a day off from their conference in Xalapa.



We departed Chichicaxtle in time to drive to Xalapa, check in to our hotel, and even do a little birding at the local university park in the last bits of daylight. Here in the capital city of Veracruz, at elevation 4,250 feet, we added new species that do not occur down on the coast, including Wedge-tailed Sabrewing and Azure-crowned Hummingbird.

We learned of bad weather in the forecast and smiled! Why is that good news? This is because a bit of rain while we are in the mountains may also detain the raptors flight, so when we return back to the coast in 3 days, the flights could be very big! We crossed fingers and looked ahead to more exciting birding in Veracruz.

Day 4 / Oct 5: Xalapa - Macuilteptl Park; Anthropological Museum; Xico - Texolo Waterfall



Our first full day in Xalapa, the capital city of Veracruz, dawned clear and bright. We spent the morning birding in the lovely Macuilteptl Park, in the center of Xalapa. The park is built around an old volcano, with walkways that steadily ascend to stunning views of the city as well as of Pico de Orizaba, the highest peak in Mexico and the highest mountain between Denali and the Andes.

The park's woodland habitat is lively with avian activity, and birds are seen with relative ease, including Rusty Sparrow, the endemic Blue Mockingbird, Brown Jay and spectacular Green Jays. We enjoyed wonderful migrants including Summer Tanager, Ovenbird, and Worm-eating, Black-and-White, Nashville, MacGillivray's, Hooded, Magnolia, Townsend's, Canada, and Wilson's Warblers, along with local resident Slate-throated Redstarts. Colorful butterflies, including Smudged Crescents, Patches (*right*) and Zebra Longwings flitted among the park's lush flower gardens and fruiting vegetation.



After a full exploration of the park, Tom, Cathie, and Vera were treated to a wonderful visit to the Anthropology Museum, personally guided by my good friend and expert historian Sagrario Cruz. The museum features world-class collections of Mexican relics, including the colossal heads (*below*) of the pre-Hispanic Olmec culture, amply reflecting the rich and storied history of the country.



After lunch, we drove through coffee plantations and small towns to the spectacular Texolo Waterfall (*right*). We found shelter from the rain, and enjoyed the beautiful scenery as well as a pair of Emerald Toucanets, a resident, but not-often-seen bird of the region. It was a wonderfully relaxing way to end a busy day!



Day 5 / Oct 6: Las Minas; Los Humeros; La Joya

Today we explored the higher regions around Xalapa, finding many new species and some Mexican endemics in lovely conifer and mixed-wood forests above 6,000 feet elevation.



Only about 30 minutes drive from Xalapa we arrived at our first site, La Joya. This impressive pine-oak forest featured nice walking tracks and a good variety of target bird species. As Gray Silky Flycatchers flew overhead, we found several mixed flocks providing stellar views of the stunning Mexican endemic Red Warbler, Golden-browed Warblers, and Crescent-chested Warblers. Townsend's and Hermit Warblers were present, along with a male Olive Warbler and a colorful pair of Hepatic Tanagers. Brown Creeper and American Robin were common in this temperate forest, much to the group's surprise.

We moved higher up the mountains, passing through the small town of Perote, and entered the desert-like Perote Valley. Here we found several Striped Sparrows (*right*), a Mexican endemic of the highlands, in its favored bunch grass habitat, along with several Canyon Towhees. At the far end of the valley we arrived at Los Humeros, a site reminiscent of Joshua Tree National Monument. Although a bit slow at mid-day, we managed to find White-eared Hummingbird, Western (Sumichrast's) Scrub-Jay, Curve-billed Thrasher, and nice looks at a flock of Black-chinned Sparrows.



We retraced our steps, then dropped down a bit into the spectacular Las Minas canyon. Our first stop at a patch of scrubby habitat produced two more Mexican endemics: Hooded Yellowthroat and Rufous-capped Brush-Finch, as well as Brown-throated House Wren. Further into the canyon, we watched resident White-collared Swifts, Chestnut-collared Swifts and Red-tailed Hawk swooping and soaring at eye-level. Looking down into the canyon we spotted a pair of Band-tailed Pigeons. Walking the terrain we enjoyed excellent close views of Gray-breasted Wood-Wren, often very hard to see. The wonderful song of Brown-backed Solitaire echoed through the canyon and we were delighted to find the singer on his perch!

On the descent back to Xalapa, we decided to stop again at La Joya, this time at an area of more scrubby forest on the other side of the road. In a lovely flower patch beside a small house we spotted a stunning male Cinnamon-bellied Flower-piercer! Further down and into the forest we found a huge group of "Black-eared" Bushtits, thus ending a great day in the highlands.

Day 6 / Oct 7: Chavarillo; Cardel; Chichicaxtle; Rio Escondido



On our last morning in Xalapa we visited the small town of Chavarrillo, situated just below the city in elevation. This slightly lower, drier location yielded new birds for our trip list. We were accompanied by my friend Alvaro, who guided us through the "ejido" (communal) land. We walked dirt roads through shade-coffee plantations and forest, along the base of the Tepeapulco Hill, which dominated the landscape, making our way to the railroad tracks and more mature forest. We heard Thicket Tinamou along the way, and had nice looks at Gray-crowned Yellowthroat and a very cooperative Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. We found Buff-bellied Hummingbird, and our first Keel-billed Toucans. We appreciated our first looks at "Bronzed-winged" Woodpecker (*left*), an endemic to northeast Mexico, and residing here at the southern edge of its range (cousin to Golden-olive Woodpecker). Along the tracks we found Rufous-browed Peppershrike, confiding Black-headed Saltator, and a close Laughing Falcon which was the bird-of-the day for many!

After enjoying refreshing drinks at Alvaro's mother's house, we made our way as quickly as possible back to Cardel, eagerly anticipating a big hawk flight after the rains. After a quick check-in and lunch at the Hotel Bienvenido, we scrambled to the roof to check the flight. Seeing little activity, we jumped back into the car and headed inland to the site at Chichicaxtle.



It was a good decision, as a massive line of hawks was flying right over the highway between the two sites. It was a good mix of Broad-winged and Swainson's Hawks (*above*); many more Swainson's than we had seen only a few days ago (the Swainson's migrate later than the Broad-winged). The flight had just picked up when we walked up to the observation deck at Chichicaxtle, and the view was phenomenal.



Lines and kettles of hawks filled the skies everywhere overhead. They were interspersed by equally-spectacular groups of American White Pelican and Wood Storks contrasting with the hawks (*above*). During the peak hours of 1:00 to 3:00 pm, we saw more than 122,000 migrating raptors! We delightfully shared this spectacle with two other visiting birding groups as well as local residents and hawk-counters whose sharp eyes and impossibly-fast tallying held us in awe. The final raptor count for the day, combined for both Cardel and Chichicaxtle sites, was 199,007. We had truly witnessed an amazing River of Raptors!

After the incredible flight, we headed to nearby Rio Escondido for some late-afternoon birding, this time entering from the lower end of the track. We were greeted by a pair of Couch's Kingbirds, a wonderful Mexican Sheartail, gorgeous male Canivet's Emerald, and Gray-crowned Yellowthroat. We retired with great joy that evening, having seen great birds and experienced an incredible raptor flight streaming over Veracruz!

Day 7 / Oct 8: Rancho El Mirador; Chichicaxtle

After yesterday's amazing raptor flight with nearly 200,000 birds reported streaming through the region, we deferred our focus on hawks today, and headed up the mountains to the El Mirador Ranch and coffee finca, situated at elevation 3,000 feet. There we met our gracious host Jorge Muller, whose family has owned the finca since the mid-1850's. He loves showing people around, explaining the coffee growing process, and pointing out the birds of the plantation. Jorge manages his expansive property with a balance of shade-grown coffee as well as native forest, recognizing the array of birds and wildlife that both habitats support.

While walking the tracks through lush vegetation we found Gartered Trogon, Blue-crowned Motmot, beautiful "Bronze-winged" Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker, and Olivaceous (*right*) and Streak-headed Woodcreepers. In the middle of our walk, with perfect timing, Odilon arrived with a treat of cookies and mid-morning coffee - local beans, of course! We watched birds and enjoyed Jorge's impromptu discourse on coffee and its production. Our walk continued through the finca where we spotted Common Bush-Tanager, White-winged Tanager, Red-crowned and Red-throated Ant-Tanagers.



Lunch at the Mirador Ranch is always a wonderful experience. On the lovely back porch of Jorge's hacienda, amid a lush garden, animated Band-backed Wrens and nectar-sipping Azure-crowned Hummingbirds, we were graciously served delicious local specialties. Dishes included chicken in a traditional Mexican barbecue cooked in banana leaves, 3 kinds of tamales (mole, ranch-style, and one made with a local seasonal herb - my favorite), Spanish-Mexican rice, black beans, and a refreshing limeade.

With heavy hearts and bellies we said goodbye to Jorge and the Mirador Ranch, and made our way back down to Cardel, stopping only to admire a few Collared Aracari along the way. We arrived in time to enjoy late afternoon hawk watching, with

impressive squadrons of White Pelicans, good flights of Swainson's Hawks, a few Broad-winged Hawks, as well as a resident Short-tailed Hawk as the sun descended on yet another lovely day in Veracruz.

Day 8 / Oct 9: Villa Rica; Quiahuiztlan; Cardel; Chichicaxtle

We started early this morning, heading up the coast to Villa Rica. Away from the highway, the quiet road was lined with pastures, mangroves and forest patches, hosting a variety of interesting birds including a close Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl and Common Black Hawk. In the village, a patch of accessible wetlands showcased Northern Jacanas, a family of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, and Muscovy Ducks (below).





Afterwards, we drove to the nearby hilltop site of Quiahuiztlan, where Totonac burial tombs rest on the side of a majestic basaltic stack which towers above the edge of the gulf. The birds are as stunning as the views, as local species forage among vegetation, and raptors often circle close overhead. The "Veracruz" Rufous-naped Wren showed well, along with animated groups of Montezuma Oropendolas.



We were awed by the spectacle of thousands of Swainson's and Broad-winged Hawks circling just above our heads, as the relatively-cool morning air kept the birds close to the coast. Large groups of Turkey Vultures joined the kettle - these will dominate the flight in a week or so, after the majority of hawks have passed through. We enjoyed great looks at an uncommon dark-morph Broad-winged Hawk. We counted 20 migrant Peregrine Falcons moving through, a number that easily surpassed Tom's 'Peregrine Falcon Big Day' in Pennsylvania!



Back in Cardel, we relished a refreshing lunch then headed out for our last day of hawk watching at Chichicaxtle. Sunny blue skies provided excellent backdrop for another memorable flight of raptors, American White Pelicans, and Wood Storks. We made friends with young local hawk-watchers, bonding over a common love of birds. Shouts of delight were heard as raptor kettles dropped lower in the cooler afternoon air, giving even closer views. One of the last birds of the day was an Apomado Falcon (*left*), garnering a collective gasp of joy as it swooped through nearby fields at top speed. It was a fitting end to a spectacular week experiencing the River of Raptors in Veracruz!

Day 9 / Oct 10: Las Barrancas; Tlacotalpan; Nanciyaga

Today we said our final farewells to Cardel and the famous hawk-watching sites, to trek southward into an entirely different region. Our goal was to explore the savannah and dry forest at Las Barrancas, looking for several specialty birds. Driving down a flat, open road, we found several of our target Double-striped Thick-knees (*right*) moving through the grasslands. Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatchers were abundant and spectacular. We also saw a Northern Mockingbird where we usually find Tropical Mockingbirds; the division of the two species is right in this area, and probably overlaps. We scanned a group of swallows perched on roadside wires and picked out the local Mangrove Swallow. Several Lesser Yellow-headed Vultures circled the skies above. We took a side track in search of another specialty, the Plain-breasted Ground-Dove. After watching a show of a stunning male Barred Antshrike, we heard a dove calling. We located the perched bird with its visible plain breast, then saw its mate; the pair of Plain-breasted Ground-Doves put on a show not often seen here this time of year.



We then moved on further south to the expansive wetlands of the Alvarado Lagoon system, where the group commented that they had probably never seen so many “white” egrets before in their lives - Great, Snowy, Cattle, and some young Little Blue Herons. We admired a handsome Limpkin (*right*) among all the waders.



We enjoyed a lovely seafood lunch in the riverside town of Tlacotalpan, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its preservation of 17th century Spanish colonial architecture and town layout. The town thrives today on fishing and tourism, with a growing number of restaurants, shops, hard goods stores and attractively-styled homes.

We moved on to the Los Tuxtlas Mountains and our destination, Catemaco, a picturesque town situated on a lake of the same name. Our lakeside hotel featured gorgeous views of rippling waters and amply-vegetated landscaping that attracted local bird species for us to admire while walking between rooms and dining area. After a quick check-in, we headed to Nanciyaga on the other side of town, for afternoon birding. This private nature reserve offers food, lodging, gift shop and guided walks through a beautiful rainforest on the edge of a lagoon. The habitat has reverted from pastures back to a native ecosystem supporting an array of birds, mammals, crocodiles and rare local flora and fauna species. Walking the dirt road we spotted Kentucky Warbler, tricky Spot-breasted Wren and White-bellied Wood-Wren. Along the edge of the lake we searched for our target bird, the Ruddy Crake. Several were calling at the same time and eventually one came close enough for Vera, Tom and Cathie to get satisfying views through the reeds of this tiny, sneaky rail. We rounded out our very productive travel day over a lakeside dinner at our hotel, a great location to relax and discuss the day's highlights.

Day 10 / Oct 11: UNAM Biological Station; Laguna Sontecompan; Los Mangos

We spent the morning exploring the lush rainforest habitat of the UNAM Biological station. This expansive reserve, founded in 1967, belongs to the Institute of Biology of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). It protects an array of threatened and diverse wildlife species, while facilitating conservation policy, university level research and environmental education programs for local communities.



We parked and walked some of the trails around the station, delighted to see Red-vented Parrots (*left*) flying off of their night-time roosts to forage, along with spectacular Keel-billed Toucans. In the forest, we found Collared Trogon, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, both Long-billed and Stripe-throated Hermits, White-bellied Emerald, Golden-olive Woodpecker, several Lesser Greenlets, and a Yellow-bellied Tyrannulet, a bird not often seen here!



We then walked the upper part of the reserve with forest on one side and open skies to the other in hopes of finding soaring raptors. The Peregrine Falcons were up and moving along with the Magnificent Frigatebirds. As we headed back down the hill a soaring pair of close Black Hawk-Eagles (*right*) put on a show as they called and screamed to each other.



After lunch in a local cafe, we were joined by local guide Francisco, and embarked upon an afternoon boat trip through mangroves on a coastal lagoon at Sontecompan. It was wonderfully relaxing and exciting to be out on the water enjoying refreshing sights and sounds.



Boat captain Ismael steered our craft away from the docks, passing close by an adult Bare-throated Tiger-Heron (*above left*) standing on the edge of the river.

During our journey, we found the complete set of 5 kingfisher species: Ringed, Belted, Amazon, Green, and the smallest and most difficult to find American Pygmy! (*above right*). We also found in the mangroves a small group of Boat-billed Herons, as well as Common Black-Hawk, Lineated Woodpecker, great numbers of Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, and a nice surprise, a stunning Gray-headed Kite (*right*).

It was a wonderful day, and we attempted to enhance it with late evening owling at a Striped Owl site. Unfortunately, rains muddied our plans, and we were unsuccessful with owls, but quite happy with the full day's list!



Day 11 / Oct 12: Ruiz Cortines; Las Barrancas; Veracruz City



On this last day of our Veracruz trip we visited one of the best birding sites in the region, the cloud forest at Ruiz Cortines. There we were met by Braulio Malega, local guide, Tuxtla Quail-Dove expert, and great friend. The cool drizzly weather slowed bird activity but did not dampen our spirits, as we relished the experience of birding beneath the thick forest canopy in this picturesque mountain range.

We were pleased to find a Black-headed Nightingale-Thrush, Spectacled and Buff-throated Foliage-gleaners, and abundantly calling White-

breasted Wood-Wren. We enjoyed nice looks at the Chestnut "Plain-breasted" Brush-Finch, an endemic subspecies of only this mountain range. We heard the calls of our target Tuxtla Quail-Dove, also an endemic of this Los Tuxtlas Mountain range, but were unfortunately unable to locate the bird. When the rains came in earnest, we headed into the nearby town to have a hot drink and snack at Braulio's family's restaurant.

The skies cleared and we headed to a forest patch on the other side of town. Walking the dirt track we spotted Yellowish Flycatcher, a more southern species usually found south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, but with a small and isolated population here in the Los Tuxtlas Mountains. We also located the local endemic Long-tailed Sabrewing (*right*), and a lovely cooperative pair of male and female Collared Trogons.



We devoured a delicious lunch back at the restaurant in town, then enjoyed a tour of the nearby gardens where we tracked down a calling Yellow-bellied Elaenia. Reluctantly we said goodbye to Braulio and his family, then settled in for the drive back north to the city of Veracruz. We couldn't resist a quick stop at Las Barrancas where we enjoyed both Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (*below*), possibly the same ones we saw two days ago!



We arrived in the port city to our historic hotel on the edge of the exciting main square. After a celebratory beer we headed for a fantastic seafood dinner and people-watching on the lively "zocalo." We lingered over our final checklist of the trip, remembering spectacular hawk flights, colorful tropical birds and many wonderful sightings on our 2014 'River of Raptors' tour!